

DELAWARE MOSQUITO CONTROL SECTION

FAQ #9. What do I do if I find a sick/dead wild bird that might have West Nile virus?

The Delaware Mosquito Control Section has resumed the collection of dead wild birds for West Nile Virus testing in 2011. As discussed in FAQ #2, the relatively recent arrival in Delaware of **West Nile virus (WNV)** is a cause for some concern, and part of the approach to dealing with the problem involves an expanded virus surveillance/monitoring program being conducted by the Mosquito Control Section. The public can be of great help to us on a statewide basis in conducting this expanded effort. If you find a dead or sick bird that you think could have been affected by WNV, please follow the protocols discussed below. While WNV has now been documented in bats, chipmunks, squirrels, raccoons, skunks, domestic rabbits and cats, as an indicator of the virus' spread and prevalence, the Mosquito Control Section still remains interested only in birds as a tracking or diagnostic tool, and only for certain species of birds at that.

First, a determination (to the best of one's ability) should be made as to what species of bird you have. **Crows, blue jays, cardinals, robins, and birds-of-prey** (hawks, eagles, falcons or owls) have shown to be quite susceptible species for WNV, and are therefore the primary bird species collected. Of these species, crows seem to be the most commonly affected and reported. Crows can be identified by their large size (approx. 12-16" in total length, or about the size of a football), matted black color (even their eyes), large beak (1-2" long), etc. Blue jays are smaller than crows, with mostly blue, black and white feathers. Most people know how to recognize a cardinal or robin, at least for males of these species. Birds-of-prey can be recognized by their large, sharp claws and hooked beaks. These are **the only bird species** (when found singly or in numbers less than five) **that should be reported** to the Mosquito Control Section. However, citizens should feel free to report localized occurrences or clusters of 5 or more sick or dead specimens of any bird species, which in observing might be associated with some type of exposure or problem not related to WNV (e.g. possibly some type of pesticide poisoning), which might then be of interest to other agencies, such as DNREC's Wildlife Section or the Delaware Department of Agriculture.

Secondly, it should be determined if the bird **has been dead less than 24 hours**. Current testing techniques require that specimen birds be fresh for accurate virus detection. A relative scale such as "the bird was not in your yard when you left for work in the morning, but was there when you returned home in the evening" would be fine for knowing the bird is probably less than 24 hours old. Dead birds that are infested with maggots, or which have deeply sunken eyes or whose feathers are in poor condition, are specimens that have probably been dead for too long for any worthwhile analyses.

After the above criteria have been met, the bird should be covered if possible by a bucket, box, trash can lid, or other type of covering to protect it from further degradation by sunlight, direct heat, flies, scavenging animals, etc. As a general precaution when handling any dead animal, it is recommended that **you do not have any bare-handed**

contact or otherwise directly handle the bird, even though from what is known about WNV you could not contract the disease by doing so. [To date, there has been no indication of any animal-to-human transmission of WNV (with exception of course by mosquitoes!), or person-to-person transmission not involving an organ transplant, blood donation or mother's milk.] A call should then be placed to the **Mosquito Control Section** under the following guidelines. If the bird is found in **New Castle County** or **northern Kent County**, call **836-2555** during **weekday hours between 8:00 am-4:00 pm**. The same reporting criteria should be used for birds found in the **southern Kent County** or in **Sussex County**, but call **422-1512** instead.